There’s a Tool for That!

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I’m a bit late to post my discussion because I’ve been at Jacob’s Pillow watching dance performances. I did my exploration of the online texts and videos before I left, and let it all percolate over the weekend. This process works well for me because I like to see what connections I make and what questions arise before I put my thoughts down. At Jacob’s Pillow, the program included an interesting article called *Seeing Dance, Talking Dance*. One section was entitled *Multiple Ways of Understanding*. It began: “Both scientific research and common sense tell us that people process information in many ways, and not all of them relate to verbal processes.” The writer recommended three approaches to experiencing (processing) the dance performances: through the journalist’s eye, the anthropologist’s eye, and the linguist’s/grammarian’s eye. For me there was a connection between this flexible and creative approach to observing and learning from dance and Universal Design for Learning, particularly in the context of literacy learning and teaching. I have long been interested in enabling students to demonstrate diverse responses to literature and language – authentic responses that show both what students have absorbed and how they have processed that learning in their own idiosyncratic ways. As a writing specialist, I’ve led and observed many writers’ workshops where, for all the teacher talk about writing as process, students are led to the starting line and herded along the same path to the same destination almost as one group. UDL means enabling students to set individual goals and regulate their own progress; it means integrating and differentiating curriculum across thematic units that strengthen students’ ability to participate as individuals as well as collaboratively; and it means opening up the curriculum to bigger ideas and more meaningful applications of those ideas. The journalist, the anthropologist, and the linguist/grammarian are in all of our students, and these perspectives – and many others – will enrich the lives of students in and out of the classroom.

As I drove out to Becket, I found myself thinking about the quote by Donna Palley on Jennifer’s Power Point on UDL: “The concept of UDL is the intersection where all our initiatives – integrated units, multi-sensory teaching, multiple intelligences, differentiated instruction, use of computers in schools, performance-based assessment, and others – come together.” I found myself returning to the idea of integrated units, largely, I think, because my primary teacher training (ages 4 to 12) in England taught me to integrate virtually the entire curriculum (from reading and writing to math to history and geography to computers, art, gym, and music) through thematic units. Primary classrooms in England are more fluid physical spaces, with children moving around in varying formations and collaborating frequently. Some classrooms don’t even have enough chairs for all children because it is expected that students don’t have a regular spot to perch and remain for most of the day. So the idea of flexibility is appealing and natural to me. Yet what I see most in my job as a reading specialist is students sitting at their desks and collaborating in limited ways, often with the same students – and often grouped according to perceived ability or behavior patterns.

I was interested to watch – and watch again – the video of the fifth-grade ELA teacher who had his students working in what looked like meaningful collaboration. Different projects, or different points on the process were represented at the same time, with students reminded to keep track of their own progress within the writing process posted on a class timeline. The teacher asked open-ended questions of the students to prompt them to share their understanding of assignments, resources, and strategies. He repeated what each child said before he moved on. He addressed students both as a class and as individuals, demonstrating his understanding of each child as an individual; and he got down on their level – on the floor if necessary.

The panel discussing this video talked positively about the roles students were using to respond to literature (Word Wizard, Artful Artist, etc.). Of course such roles have been widely used for well over a decade, and many experts believe that it is more valuable to encourage students to move on from roles into more open-ended discussions. I have seen, however, that roles can help students who are reticent or unsure of themselves to participate collaboratively around a text.

The menu of online texts, videos, and tools offered useful background as well as applications of the key UDL principles of representation, expression, and engagement – of offering students meaningful and diverse options in all of these critical aspects of teaching and learning. I was particularly interested in Dr. Levine’s discussion of “demystification”: of using plain talk and empathy to help students to understand their strengths and weaknesses. It is too easy to back off the direct conversation with students about their reading and writing weaknesses; and yet how are they to make real progress if they cannot see the shifting target? I believe in fostering students’ ability to set goals and to monitor their own progress in reading and writing, and UDL supports this practice. I was struck, too, by the CAST reference to “the illusory average learner” to whom teachers pitch the curriculum. It is a powerful indictment to say that classrooms are disabling, but so is the evidence of school failure powerful.

I most wonder what the classroom organized around UDL principles would look like – both physically and in terms of the processes students would be enabled to experience and learn from. The implications for professional development of teachers are enormous – as is the professionalism of teachers. Most teachers I know don’t like teaching to standardized tests but acknowledge that too much of their time is spent doing just that. The CAST presentation talks about co-opting students into sharing the executive functions (and power) within classrooms. By this they mean meaningful change toward enabling students to set goals and monitor their own progress. In the *Voicethread* presentation, one speaker stated that schools are not allowing students to do what they are able to do and what they want to do. I work in a school where many students do not have a lot of experience with up-to-date technology (at home or school) and many are struggling readers and writers. Yet we do not often enough stop to inquire what they are truly able to do and what they would like to do. To me, the teacher’s key role is to *enable* students to explore the big questions and the big answers to those questions. The curriculum, the classroom, and the teacher’s place in the classroom should be fluid and supportive of that exploration.

Teachers need to be armed with a broader and deeper toolbox – tools that work to support diverse students to think critically. We are too often too focused on the pre-conceived, uniform product rather than the complex process; and too encumbered with the idea that the product and the process must be the same for everyone.

One specific tool that I found engaging and potentially valuable to students is *Storybirds*. A meaningful use for this highly visual writing tool in the elementary classroom is to foster collaboration among students. The program is straightforward, user-friendly, and appealing. Its premise is that here students will begin with the visual, provided by high-quality artwork from a wide range of international artists. The artwork is intended to suggest stories or poems, contrary to the common order of production. For students who struggle with writing or even getting started, this could be a refreshing opportunity to try something new. To write poems, students drag words from the word wall, which can be refreshed at any point, and rearrange them to their satisfaction, much like playing with magnetic poetry sets. Stories are typed into books once students have chosen the illustrations they like. It is indeed easy to use, easy to make changes, and fun to experiment. Students can save their stories to build classroom libraries and email them to their friends and family, and teachers can post assignments and oversee and respond to students’ writing. The program is free.